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SUBJECT: JORDAN ELECTIONS: ON ELECTION EVE, POLITICS IN AN
ARC OF POVERTY

REF: A. AMMAN 4430
[1](#)B. AMMAN 4559
[1](#)C. AMMAN 4277
[1](#)D. AMMAN 4584
[1](#)E. AMMAN 4561

Classified By: Classified by Ambassador David Hale
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. In the stretch of slums and refugee camps that lies to the south and east of Amman, the campaign for Jordan's November 20 elections has a markedly different flavor than elsewhere in the country. Candidates here speak frankly about the issues that matter to their constituents: poor services, economic opportunity, and under-representation. Voters are looking for "fixers": parliamentarians who can smooth access to government services and increase their quality of life. In an area where the Islamic Action Front (IAF) is prominent, candidates openly attack the party's platform and compete with it directly on bringing home the services that matter to voters. For the most part, the prospects for change in the area appear small to voters and candidates. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) The suburbs and satellite cities that lie in an arc from southern Amman east to Ruseifa and Zarqa exude poverty and marginalization. The area includes several refugee camps, and is heavily populated by Jordanians of Palestinian origin. The air is heavy with the smell of motor oil and ozone - this is the heartland of heavy industry in Jordan, with large industrial plants spewing emissions into surrounding communities and large diesel trucks belching visible exhaust as they carry finished products to market. Homes range from drab apartment blocks to shanties built precariously on the sides of hills. "Overcrowded" is one of the adjectives that most Jordanians use to describe the area - a solid mass of settlement with little green space to speak of.

[1](#)3. (C) In this band of poverty, politics take on a different tone. Tribal bonds, which dictate loyalties in much of the rest of Jordan (REF A) are dulled here. Campaigns are run less on personality, and more on the ability of candidates to deliver the services that the people of the area desperately need such as clean water, cheap transportation, and access to employment opportunities. The politicians that strive to represent East Amman and Zarqa are blunt, and focus squarely on the plight of their constituents. They are less likely to be tribal chieftains, and more likely to be community activists or local "fixers" who solve problems in Jordan's bureaucracy.

Ruseifa: A Community Activist Turns Low-Budget Candidate

[1](#)4. (C) "I'm an original refugee, unlike my kids," says Hussein Al-'Alamat, a candidate in Ruseifa. "I'm a real candidate, not one of these people who parachute in just for

the election." He spent twenty years teaching high school in the Hitteen (Marka) Camp in the gritty eastern suburbs of Amman. After retiring, he took up community activism and opened a law office that defends the rights of the community.

'Alamat sees his campaign for parliament as a natural extension of his life as an activist and member of the Palestinian-origin community. Unlike some of his rivals, he is running on a shoestring budget. His campaign signs are spray painted on cardboard with stencils. The fliers outlining his issues are one-color photocopies, donated by an unknown benefactor from the community. With a week remaining before the election, 'Alamat has yet to open his campaign headquarters as he cannot afford to do so.

15. (C) In any other district, 'Alamat's campaign would be seen as a long shot - he has a negligible tribal base, his campaign headquarters consists of his one-room office, and he has almost no money to spend on flashy campaign materials. Prestige is of little concern. His office is dingy and depressing, with beat up furniture that contrasts greatly with the lavish sitting rooms of tribal candidates in other districts. Yet in Ruseifa, he is a serious contender. In the previous parliamentary elections, he came in third in a district with two seats. The steady stream of well-wishers attest to his popularity as a community activist turned politician. "I won't represent the government for the people. I'm going to represent the people with the government," is a key 'Alamat slogan. He told emboffs, "those who know me don't even have to ask if I'm going to change once I get into parliament. They know that I'm part of this community."

16. (C) Local environmental issues are a central plank of 'Alamat's platform, and an extension of his concern with

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government services. The phosphate plant in Ruseifa is an infamous polluter, and was mentioned as a political issue by many other candidates in the area that we spoke to. 'Alamat is well aware of health problems in the community that result from the phosphate plant, and says that he goes to "tens of funerals" every year. He tells voters that if elected, he will campaign for a clean-up of the plant or a covering that will keep emissions from seeping into the surrounding area. 'Alamat points out the raw sewage that often appears in the streets of parts of Ruseifa, claiming that as a parliamentarian he will root out those who are responsible. He also talks about the lack of public space and greenery in the area, promising that the government will provide such things if he makes it into parliament.

Zarqa: Taking it to the Streets

17. (C) "I'm looking for votes from the street," says Mansur Murad, a candidate for the Circassian/Chechen seat in Zarqa. In spite of the combined population of about 2,000 Circassian and Chechen voters in his district, Murad estimates that 7,000 votes are needed to win the seat designated for that part of the population (REF C). All of the candidates for the Circassian/Chechen seat are bringing in voters from the surrounding area, and are making appeals to Palestinian-origin voters in particular. Murad touts his long-term association with Palestinian issues as a major plus for his campaign. "I used to be a terrorist, but no more," he brags, citing his alleged involvement with the 1970 hijacking and destruction of a Pan Am airliner at an airfield near Zarqa. He claims that his association with this event still resonates within the Palestinian-origin community, and helped him gain a seat in the parliament of 1999-2003.

18. (C) Charitable work and the ability to use government connections are key qualifications for any candidate looking to represent this area, and Murad knows it. Like many other candidates throughout Jordan, he is a "fixer" who uses his connections to cut through bureaucratic red tape and help

people in the area find government jobs. "Recently, the Circassian community in particular started to look at its own future," he opines. Declining birth rates within the community and intermarriage are diluting the strength of the Circassian community's political voice, and Murad worries that it will "lose its favored position" within the Jordanian government. Facing the economic decline of their neighborhoods and their own community, Murad and other leaders within the Circassian community are trying to get a foothold in business, with his connections in the government as an asset that many lean on. "In the past, Circassians in Jordan were tied to the civil service. Now, we're learning from our Palestinian neighbors and are making a conscious move towards business." Note: Circassians remain well-placed among the country's security services, including the General Intelligence Directorate, the Jordan Armed Forces, and those who guard the King. End Note.

Wahdat Refugee Camp: Services and the Continual Campaign

¶9. (C) Mohammed Al-Kouz is one of four representatives for the most populous parliamentary district in Jordan, the Amman Second. The area is home to Wahdat refugee camp, the second largest camp in Jordan, and overall encompasses 200,000 voters. Note: By contrast, Karak's sixth district has only 6,700 voters. End Note. Kouz sees the under-representation of this overwhelmingly Palestinian area as deliberate. While he does not run as a Palestinian per se (REF D), Kouz must appeal to the issues of his constituency, which include discrimination in government employment and services. "We're all Jordanians now, we want a piece of the pie," he complains. He also addresses the broader plight of Palestinians in his campaign, frequently speaking about the issue of the right of return with his constituents.

¶10. (C) Kouz has been essentially running for re-election ever since he won his parliamentary seat in 2003. He does this because he has to - of the four seats in Amman's second district, two of them are seen as "safe seats" for the IAF, and one is similarly guaranteed for a former IAF member. This leaves only one seat truly competitive, and in order to have a chance at it, Kouz needs to make ongoing, continuous contact with voters on the issues that really matter to them. This is especially true this time around, with thirty-three candidates vying for the district's four seats (in 2003, there were twenty-three candidates). He has spent the last four years meeting everyone in Wahdat refugee camp. "I know everyone in the camp. One hundred percent," he boasts.

¶11. (C) As a current member of the parliament, Kouz is well acquainted with the machinery of politics in poor areas of

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Amman. He tells us bluntly: "People don't want politics. They want services." A large part of his continuous campaign involves making sure the voters in his district are being served well by the government. He is constantly intervening on behalf of his constituents with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education to make sure that the voice of the district is heard. Through the use of his connections and official position, Kouz demonstrates the key qualification that many voters in the current election cycle are looking for - the ability to use their connections on behalf of their constituents.

¶12. (C) Kouz's campaign is run out of his scruffy one-room office near the camp, where a long line of well-wishers and supplicants awaits his attention. He was hesitant to meet with Embassy personnel in such a public place, acknowledging that doing so may hurt his chances in the election. Note: Kouz told his staff and the assembled crowd that we were from the Swedish Embassy. Luckily for him, Poloff looked the part. End Note. Voicing a commonly heard conspiracy theory from some quarters, Kouz maintains that the United States is behind anti-Palestinian discrimination in Jordan. "If the

U.S. wanted to, it could solve the entire Palestinian issue today," he proclaims. "All that's needed is pressure on Jordan's government to deal with us fairly."

Taking on the IAF

¶13. (C) With its large Palestinian-origin population, the arc of poverty is a stronghold of the Islamic Action Front (IAF). All of the candidates we met with in East Amman, Ruseifa, and Zarga acknowledged the electoral strength of the IAF, and predicted that it would do well despite internal fissures and a lower number of candidates in comparison with the 2003 elections. Charities linked to the IAF are pillars of the community in this area, and have a concrete impact on the lives of citizens through food giveaways, educational support, and even stipends for poor families. Mohammed Al-Kouz says that another factor in the IAF's popularity is its use of emotional issues that resonate with Palestinian-origin voters in particular. He postulates that their stance against Jordan's peace treaty with Israel gains them additional support. Candidates agree that the mere fact that the IAF is an organized political force gives it an advantage.

¶14. (C) Still, being in the trenches with the IAF has convinced the candidates in the area that the party has significant, demonstrable weaknesses. Several candidates told us that they compete head-to-head with the IAF on provision of services in particular. The key distinction made by many of the candidates we talked to is between charity and the basic functions of government. Both cater to the needs of voters, but in markedly different ways. Mohammed Al-Kouz says that while the IAF can deal with the physical and monetary needs of their constituents through their charities, they lack the connections and standing within the government to deliver the jobs and improvements in government services like health care, education, and infrastructure that most voters are really looking for. Ja'far Al-Abdullat, another candidate in Amman's second district, says that "voters want a credible messenger with the government" - something that the IAF cannot claim to be.

¶15. (C) Al-Kouz aggressively courts IAF voters, and demonstrates his superior connections by delivering measurable infrastructure improvements. He worked his government connections to increase the level of services at a local hospital in Wahdat camp, and presided over the opening of a school as well. Ja'far Al-Abdullat used his position on Amman's municipal council to bring a water filtration plant to the area - something that requires government connections that the IAF cannot muster. Mansur Murad started a charity of his own to beat the IAF at its own game. His charity gives monthly stipends to poor people and uses the connections he made as a former member of parliament to demonstrate that even in the world of charity, there is an alternative to the IAF. "The IAF knows that I am a threat," he boasts. "They see the similarities between what I'm doing and what they're doing, and they're afraid."

¶16. (C) Candidates we talked to are using the IAF's campaign slogan ("Islam is the solution") against it. "There is nothing behind their slogan," complains Rashid Barayseh, a candidate in Amman's second district. "How can they deal with Jordan's economy? They have no plan other than Islam, which is no plan at all." Mansur Murad says that "the IAF uses Islam to cover its fundamental weaknesses. When they were in parliament, they voted against an income tax law that would have benefited many poor people." Rashid Barayseh says that the IAF "tries to provoke him" by using rumors and other

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dirty tricks (REF E). He fights back by alerting his constituents to the fact that IAF candidates standing for office do not live in the district. "If you know where their houses are, then vote for them," he taunts. Mohammed Al-Kouz

even challenges the IAF on its Palestinian credentials and its membership in the Muslim Brotherhood. "The IAF candidates say they're Palestinians, but once they get into parliament, they all run away from Palestinian issues. The problem is that they are receiving orders on what to say."

¶17. (C) Not surprisingly, the economy is a central issue in the arc of poverty. Many of the workers here earn the minimum wage of USD 170 per month - not enough to feed a large family. Rising prices are an issue across Jordan in this election (REF B), but are acutely felt in this area. 'Alamat puts it this way: "Even our children are politicized by rising prices. If the price of tomatoes goes up by a few cents this week, that will mean that the children of Ruseifa will no longer be able to eat tomatoes. It's as simple as that." He says that divorce rates in his district are as high as seventy percent because of the strains the economy is putting on families. Alamat's economic plan revolves around government investment in small and medium-sized enterprises, which he hopes will increase employment opportunity and decrease the region's dependence on heavy industries that sully its environment and reputation.

Prospects for Change

¶18. (C) Every candidate in this area with whom we spoke recognizes that if progress is to be achieved, it will be achieved gradually. "As an individual, I might not be able to do anything in parliament," says Hussein Al-'Alamat. "To tell you the truth, the whole parliament should just focus on this district for its entire term." Mohammed Al-Kouz talks about the difficulty he faces as a current parliamentarian when talking about the economy. He acknowledges that the next parliament will not have the political power or cohesive strength to impact the concerns of voters such as unemployment and rising prices. Rashid Barayseh remarks, "even if you're a genius, you can only do so much in parliament." He believes that change is only likely in the medium term, not during the course of the next parliament.

Comment

¶19. (C) Politics in this stretch of poor neighborhoods and refugee camps have a different flavor. In the rest of Jordan, tribal politics obscures the policies of candidates. In poor areas, by contrast, the issues that matter are right on the surface. Voters want economic opportunity, the services they feel they deserve, and relief from the burden of hand-to-mouth living. Yet even more, the voters in these regions are looking for respect. The candidates who represent them realize that the people of this area are under-represented and largely overlooked by Jordan's government and bureaucracy, and that change in their lives will likely be slow to emerge.

¶20. (C) As reported Ref D, the issue of Palestinian identity continues to color the actions of the parliamentary campaign throughout Jordan. Yet in these poorer areas heavily populated by Jordanians of Palestinian origin, the issue is much closer to the surface. Until a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict emerges - and thus a solution to the conundrum of Palestinian identity in Jordan - the issue will remain politically sensitive for East Bankers and Palestinian-origin Jordanians alike. East Bankers are reluctant to have "foreign" Palestinian politics played out in Jordan. For their part, Palestinians in Jordan will continue to use their defense mechanisms that reinforce their distance from the political game, despite the King's earlier unsuccessful efforts to encourage businessmen (who are largely of Palestinian origin) to form a political party. Palestinian-origin Jordanians have absorbed the lesson of their fathers' generation: if Palestinian-Jordanians organize politically, even on non-Palestinian issues, they risk re-opening wounds in this society and inviting attacks upon them as "foreigners."

Hale